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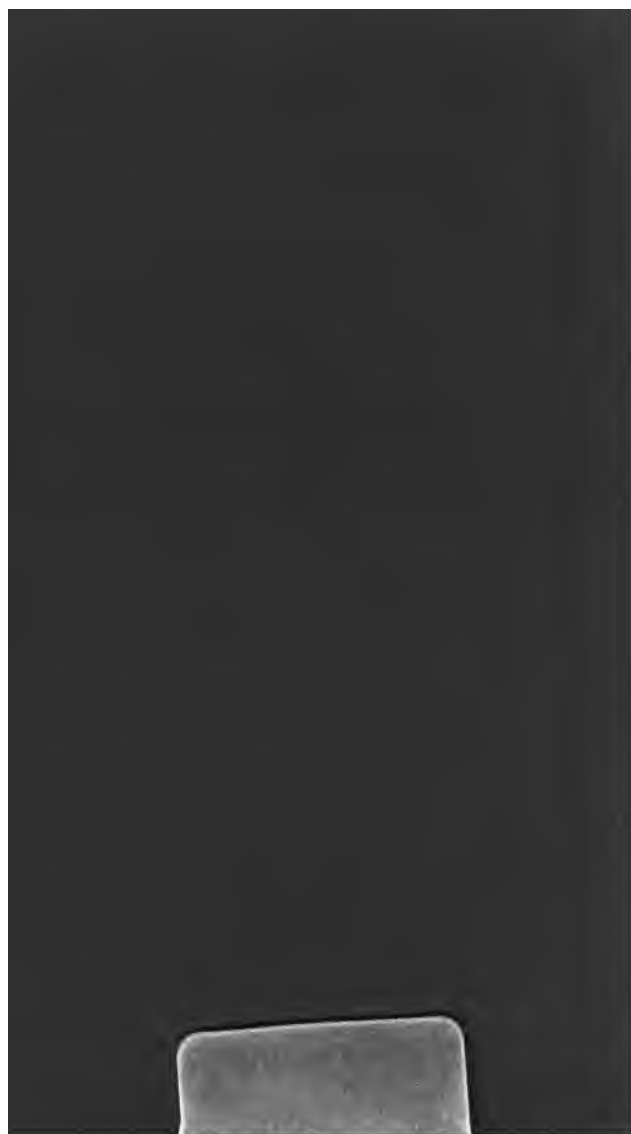
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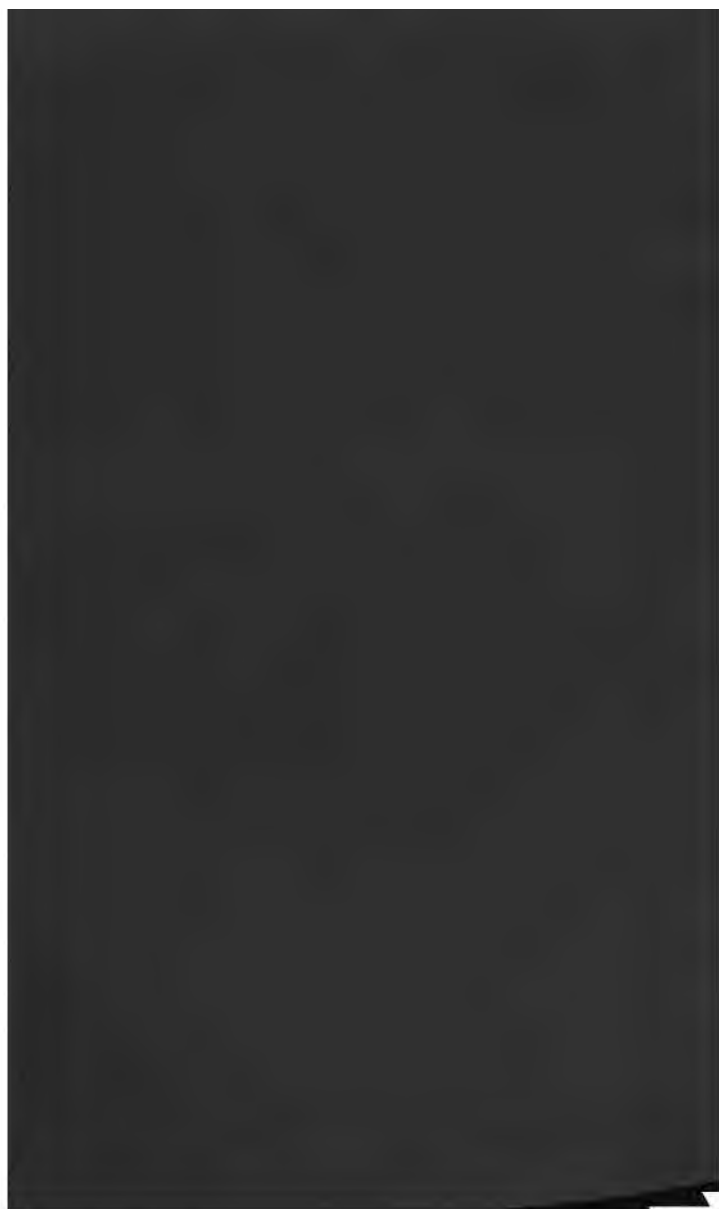
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THE BIRTHDAY OF CHRIST

STANLEY LEATHES, M.A.







THREE SERMONS

*PREACHED BEFORE THE UNIVERSITY
OF CAMBRIDGE,*

DECEMBER, 1865.

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*THE BIRTHDAY OF CHRIST: ITS
PREPARATION, MESSAGE AND WITNESS.*

THREE SERMONS

Preached before the University of Cambridge,

DEC. 24, 25, 31; 1865.

BY

STANLEY LEATHES, M.A.

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TO

C. W.

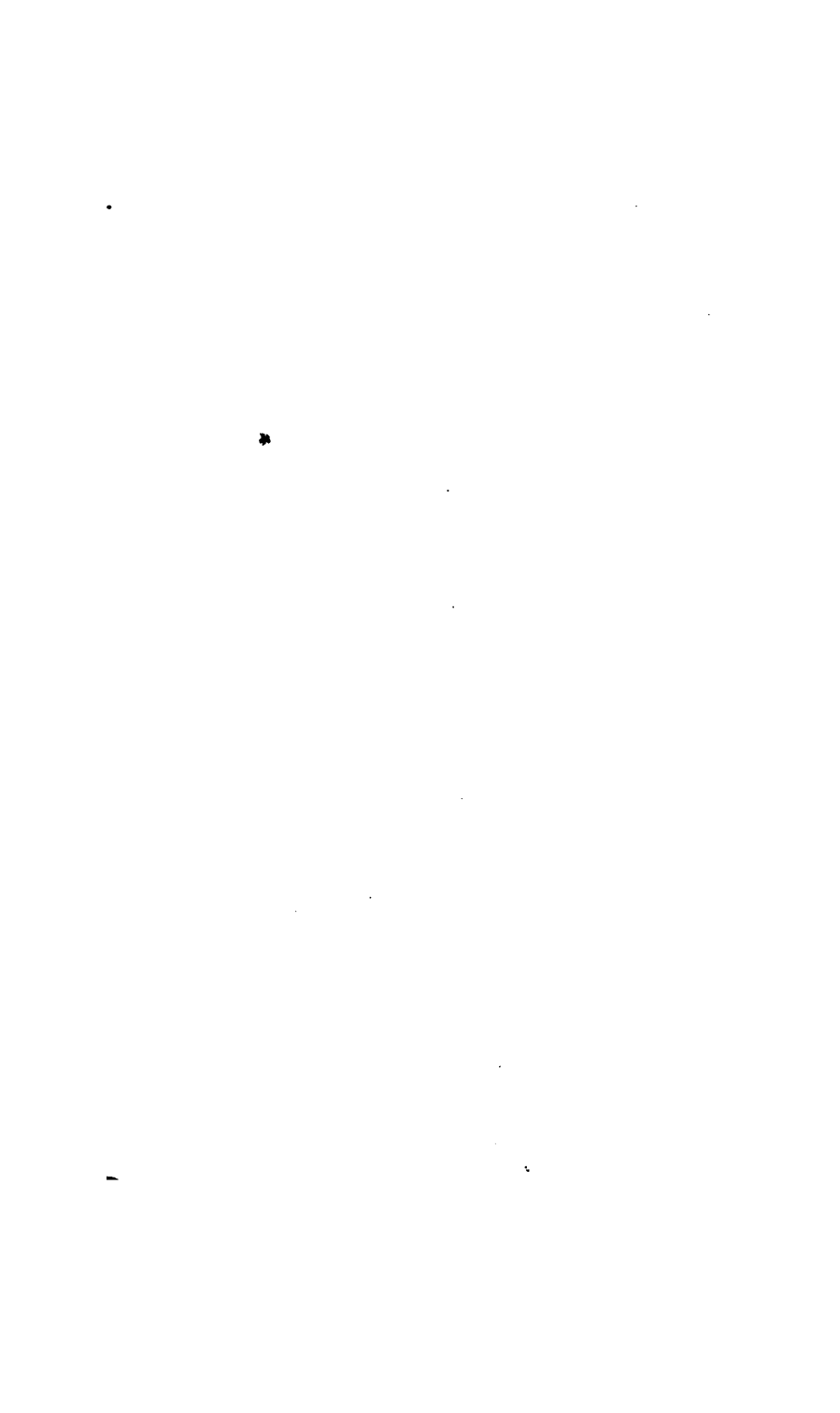
IN TOKEN OF

AFFECTIONATE GRATITUDE,

AND

AS A MARK OF

CHRISTIAN REGARD AND FRIENDSHIP.



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SERMON I.
*THE BIRTHDAY OF CHRIST—ITS
PREPARATION.*

ST JOHN I. 45.

*We have found Him, of whom Moses in the Law,
and the Prophets, did write, Jesus of Naza-
reth, the Son of Joseph.*

SUCH was the confession of Philip when he found Nathanael, and such was his invitation to him to come to Jesus. I purpose dwelling awhile upon these remarkable words, in the hope that they may furnish matter for reflection not unsuited to the last Sunday of this Advent season, and may help us to prepare for the fit celebration of our Christmas Festival to-morrow. They do indeed speak of Christ as already come, but they point most distinctly to the long chain of preparation which went before His coming. And it is in this respect that their fitness for my purpose will be most apparent. At the same time we must bear in mind that according to their actual order in the English, their implied

logical order in the Greek, they speak of Christ as found before they refer to the preparation which preceded His coming. They fall in therefore very well with our position as professed Christians, who are invited by the present season of the Church's year to prepare for the coming of Christ. We may indeed not unwisely, nor without advantage to ourselves, look back over the long series of events and the long line of prophecies which made ready the way and prepared men's minds for the advent of the Messiah, but only when we can do so with the assured conviction that Christ is come, and with an unwavering though a humble hope that we ourselves have found Him. And it is surely in this spirit that the season invites us to such contemplation. It is as Christians that we are asked to worship Christ, and as Christians that we are called on to review the elaborate machinery of preparation which ushered in His coming; that is as persons who already believe in Christ, and are not staggered by the fact, the assumed fact, that prophecy and miracle prepared His way.

And in like manner the Apostles in this case as in others were first arrested by the fact that they had discovered Christ, and then struck by the coincidence that the Scriptures bore wit-

ness to Him. It was not that they came with a certain notion ready-made of what the Christ should be, but that when the Christ appeared He harmonised their conflicting notions, He corrected those that were false and confirmed those that were true. That they had no accurate preconceived notion is evidenced by the whole history of their education and training as we read it in the Gospels. It was not that Christ verified their previously existing thoughts of Him, but that He gave them new conceptions of Himself and of His office which verified themselves. And then in the light of His presence a new glory shone upon the ancient Scriptures which made them more glorious still by bringing out the depth and fulness of their meaning, while it witnessed to the truth that was in Him. And I apprehend that it is most important for us clearly to realise and justly to appreciate the character of this progress towards conviction. It first took possession of the heart and then justified itself to the reason, instead of first satisfying the reason and then gaining access to the heart. Now men in our days are very slow to recognise the difference. They demand the removal of this difficulty and of that before they will consent to give in their adherence to the Gospel. They fritter away what little faith they

have in objections to this and that subordinate point, believing them to be essential, and then they have no faith left for the great central truths: they make the validity of these to depend upon minor questions of detail. Whereas if they had themselves, in the language of St John, distinctly found Christ, all these subordinate questions would fall into their true position of comparative insignificance. It is here no less than in other things that the greater includes the less, yea the less is altogether absorbed and swallowed up in the greater. If men would but bring themselves face to face with the great facts of the Gospel, and answer the question of their belief in them with a Yes or a No, they would be in a far more satisfactory condition, and all other questions would sooner or later adjust themselves. But as it is they go on cavilling at this thing and objecting to the other, without the resolution openly and deliberately to disbelieve, and yet all the time only half believing. One thing at least is sufficiently obvious, that such men have not found Christ: is it therefore any wonder if they are undecided upon the dependent and subsidiary question as to whether or not Moses and the prophets wrote of Him? It is plain then that their process in these matters should be one of inversion; they

are endeavouring to arrive at a state of conviction by means of the reason, whereas on the other hand, if the heart were first converted and subdued, the reason would be speedily satisfied.

Again, we must not shrink from acknowledging the fact, and the sooner we acknowledge it the better, that there will always be a point beyond which it is impossible to satisfy reason. Not only will there ever be something which we cannot prove, but the very first principles of faith must be taken for granted. There are postulates in the rudiments of Christ, as well as in the rudiments of science. There must be a *petitio principii*, a begging of the question, somewhere. It may be humiliating to confess it—it is humiliating to confess it—but this is the very humiliation that we want, and to which we must submit; for Christ's Gospel is for little children, and not for the men of reason; it is for the poor in spirit, and not for those who worship no God but intellect. This may seem trivial and commonplace, or possibly, as uttered here, even out of place, and a mere repetition of ordinary stock assertions; but for all that it is the truth, and a truth that we are all prone to forget, and very loth to accept. We must first make up our minds whether we will have Christ for our Lord and Master before

we can prove it to our reason that He has a right to be so. If we make up our minds to have Him, it becomes, comparatively speaking, a work of supererogation, a superfluous work, to try to establish His right. If we make up our minds not to have Him, I do verily believe there will still always linger, or at least at times, however much we may strive to persuade ourselves to the contrary, a dormant but not altogether extinct conviction, an uneasy faint misgiving, that He has a valid right to be so. I am speaking now of Christ's dominion with reference to intellectual belief, and not to the moral conduct of the life. This latter is a point on which there can be no room for any difference of opinion; all are agreed, except the inwardly corrupt and the outwardly abandoned, that whatever else is doubtful, the reality of moral obligation to rectitude and purity is fixed and certain. Indeed, there are those who seem prepared to admit that this is the only thing of which we can be certain, but I am speaking now of Christ's authority in matters of intellectual belief; and I do maintain, that if we refuse to take Him for our Master here, it is not possible at all times to lull a certain misgiving that He has nevertheless a right to be so. I believe that Christ, as a real and living Person,



asserts His authority to the individual conscience, and makes it felt, though it may be disregarded, oftener than many persons may be willing to allow. If there is a Christ, my brethren, this might well be so; if He is the mere creation of human fancy, of course it cannot.

1. Now let us ask, How did the Apostles know that Jesus was the Christ? Clearly not because they saw that He tallied exactly with all that Moses and the prophets had written of Him. To find out this correspondence was the work of time, and one special result of the education of the Holy Spirit. All that they knew from the Scriptures of the old dispensation was that there should be a Messiah, but how did they know that this was He? We may not shrink from the difficulties that this question involves, for the answer to it will give us a reason identical with that upon which we ourselves believe that Jesus is the Christ. They knew it because, and only because, He fully satisfied their conscience. That He likewise satisfied the Scriptures was a matter of subsequent discovery, which furnished the evidence of reason, but that upon which they believed was the evidence of conscience. They knew instinctively, intuitively, and, as it seems, on the first occasion of their meeting with Jesus, that

He was the Christ, and they knew it by a process which I do not hesitate to say was not susceptible of rational or demonstrative proof. Reason could not sound the depth, nor penetrate to the inmost recesses of such a faith as theirs, for it sprang from a conviction of the soul, and not from a demonstration of the intellect. In other words, there must have been even here, in this case, a begging of the question, a begging of many questions which reason might justly ask, but which probably were not asked, because conscience triumphed over reason.

To be sure, it is likely that Philip may have been influenced to some extent by Andrew and Peter, and that they again had been instructed by the Baptist, but *how* came it that they believed the Baptist? *why* did they believe in the mission of John? Would it be thought sufficient nowadays for a man to *say* that he had seen the Spirit descend, in order to his being believed? Would it be thought any thing else than a mark of fanaticism to say so? And if it is replied, that John was recognised as the voice of one crying in the desert, again I ask, upon whose testimony but his own? Would it be admitted nowadays; is it admitted nowadays to be perfectly clear that this was the meaning of Isaiah's words? Even if the authority of those

words themselves were accepted as conclusive, how could it be known that it was conclusive? Thus it is easy to see that it is not possible to make out a line of evidence which shall be perfectly satisfactory to any except one who is already predisposed to believe; that is, who is prepared to acquiesce in begging the question somewhere. I fully allow that if a single link in the chain of evidence is once granted, all the rest may easily be supplied and substantiated. If the authority of the prophecies or the personal testimony of John is admitted, all the rest conclusively follows; but for the very reason that all hang together, if you take away one you destroy all. In other words, it is not possible to exhibit the argument for Divine Truth in such a way as not to make demands upon the faith somewhere, to supply its obvious deficiencies. You cannot get a mathematically exact scheme of evidence. If you could, every one would necessarily be, in spite of himself, a Christian. There is enough, and more than enough, for those who have the believing heart; but for those who have not, it is impossible to conceive the amount of additional evidence short of demonstration which would suffice to convince them. 'If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will

they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.'

And I for one am not ashamed to acknowledge this to the very fullest extent, because to do so at once places the truth of God upon its right foundation. That truth laughs to scorn the intellect and the reason, and appeals first and principally to the faith of man. It does not say, I will prove this to you that you may believe and know it, but believe this and you shall live, and therefore know it. Give in your simple and unwavering belief to the plain facts of the Gospel, and they shall be corroborated by ten thousand tokens; but withhold your belief till they are incontrovertibly established, and you will most certainly never believe.

Now the confession of Philip, 'We have found the Messiah,' precisely expressed the operation of such a faith as this. It could be accounted for on no logical principles. From the writings of the Prophets and the traditions of his fathers he knew of a Messiah, but how could he be sure that this was he? Again, I repeat, only because Jesus proved Himself to be so to his heart and conscience. As yet Christ had wrought no miracles and taught no doctrine, but Philip's faith was elicited by the

divine spell and personal attraction of the living Man before him. It was heart speaking to heart, and spirit communing with spirit, 'This is He of whom Moses spake. We were waiting for a Christ, this is the Messiah.' But it was the personal influence, or if one may so say without seeming to be irreverent, it was the personal *charm* of the presence of Jesus which wrought that conviction in the Apostle's mind, and not the consistent and exact agreement which could be logically made out to subsist between the statements of the Scriptures and the person of Jesus. It is obvious that the impression was too instantaneous to be explained in this way. The conclusions of reason are slow, the intuitions of faith are swift and sudden; and so it was with Philip. He believed in Jesus as soon he found Him, he did not know how completely He fulfilled the Scriptures of the prophets till long afterwards.

2. Now I am persuaded that what was the order of conviction in his case must be the same also in our own. We must first believe in Christ, and then we shall be in a position to appreciate all that Moses and the prophets wrote of Him. But if we hold, so to say, our faith in suspense, until we have conclusively verified every prophetic utterance, and ~~es-~~

blished its reference to Jesus, it is more than possible that we may never believe. The ground will become more and more uncertain every step we take, not a single prophecy but will seem open to question ; we shall go on staggering and stumbling, the light will become more and more obscure, and our way will issue in darkness, perplexity and confirmed doubt. This must surely have been witnessed in the experience of some present ; if not, it certainly has been in my own.

The great practical question then for us to consider is, Have we found the Christ? It does not follow that because we are familiar by the accidents of birth and education with His name, that therefore we have found Him. There were many besides Philip of whom this was true, men versed in the writings of Moses and the prophets, but he and his fellow-disciples alone said, or could say, 'We have found the Christ.' How then are we to arrive at the answer to this question? The first indication to guide us to it will be our personal attachment to the man Christ Jesus, as he is here called 'Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.' The apostles constantly laboured to shew that Jesus was the Christ, that the lowly carpenter was the heir of the

promises, and the son of David. His Name and Person then will be dear to us. He will be the object of our love. Not, however, merely as an historic idea, but as an actual living Person with whom we can hold communion, and who can bless us with His Spirit; and then secondly, if we have found Him we shall experience the blessed results of that discovery. This will be the key to our personal attachment to Him, for it will be the ground of personal obligation. We shall rejoice in the conscious possession of all those benefits which flow from His Redemption. We shall know what it is to be redeemed. The sense of complete personal emancipation from sin will be ours. We shall be able to understand the double consciousness which St Paul's words express, 'I am crucified with Christ : nevertheless I live ; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me : and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God : ' that is, though deeply sensible of sin as an abiding and inherent presence, we shall know also of a perfect remedy for sin, by being united to Him in whom is no sin, and by being made partakers of His divine nature. To the man who in his own personal experience is conscious of this divine life it is utterly absurd to talk of

inconclusive evidence, he has a sufficient answer in his own heart. His witness is within. He knows whom he has believed, and he knows that he only lives by belief in Him, and that he had no conscious life till he did believe in Him. The minor questions of criticism or textual interpretation or anything else are as nothing to him, for he knows with the fulness of all possible certainty that God has revealed His Son in him, and that he has found the Christ, and therefore he is not staggered by the presumption, but much more is most deeply thankful for the fact that Moses in the Law and the Prophets did write of Him. He can read clear and satisfactory tokens of Christ in every page of the Old Testament, unmistakeable proofs that the holy men who were its authors lived by the same spiritual life that he lives by, that his experience was theirs, and that what was theirs is his, and consequently the fact is borne in upon him with overwhelming testimony that that which he has believed is the truth of God, and is no lie, seeing that at sundry times and in divers manners the Spirit of God has wrought the same unvarying work, but has only wrought it where His operation has been acknowledged and His will confessed.

Does this seem strange doctrine to any of

you, my brethren? Whether it be familiar or whether it be strange, I for one am certain that it is the truth, and moreover I am convinced that it is the only doctrine that can successfully resist the open and insidious attacks which are made upon the faith in these days, as it is the only doctrine that can sustain the racked and languid soul in the tedious days and nights of sickness, or can cheer the drooping soul at the hour of death. You may not mock at it, though when the frame is strong and the pulse beats high, you may be moved to do so, for rest assured that scoff at it as you may the time will come when it will seem to you as though it might be cheaply purchased, if purchase it you might, by the wealth of worlds. If the shades of death close on your failing eyes and there is no whisper within to tell you that in your case Christ is found, I envy you not, no, not though your riches were all that heart could desire, and your intellectual achievements in this university or in the world at large were as brilliant as it is possible to conceive. 'For what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose himself, or be cast away?'

Suffer me then, my brethren, in these last hours of the Advent season to urge upon you the vast importance of determining with

yourselves whether or not you have found the Christ. Does the coming Christmas festival mean anything or nothing to you? Can you rejoice at its welcome tidings, that a Saviour is born to you, or are you dallying with the spirit of unbelief, not able and unwilling to make up your minds whether or not there has been a Christ, or whether Jesus of Nazareth is He? Paradoxical as it may sound, you cannot judge of the evidence for Him till you have first given Him your heart. Christ Himself refused to tell the chief priest and elders by what authority He did His mighty works until they had made up their minds as to the mission of the Baptist, who preached repentance. That is, the impenitent are not qualified to estimate the claims of Christ. It is those only who have bowed to Him who can recognise His majesty. It is those only who *believe* that can see the glory of God in Him. And what is this but to beg the whole question of His claims on our belief? It must ever be so, and if we have the humility of Christians we shall not be too proud to confess it.

Of course I must here protest against being understood to affirm or even to suppose that the existing body of Christian evidence is in itself unsatisfactory or insufficient. Far from it.

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On the contrary, to the *believer* that evidence is irresistible and overwhelming. But not being of a demonstrative nature it presupposes the existence of a faculty that is not, strictly speaking, one to which mere evidence appeals. And therefore if the Christian evidence were capable of being worked out even to demonstration the result produced would not be that which the Gospel aims at producing, when it appeals to our faith, and which it does produce when it is received into the heart by faith. Demonstration would leave the heart untouched; it might captivate the fancy, or even influence the conduct; it could not move the affections, and might not influence the will. And therefore it is that I dwell so strongly upon the need of seeking after and cultivating this faculty of true Gospel faith, as a thing by no means supplying the place of evidence which is necessarily and obviously indispensable—for how should it supply *that*? but yet at the same time as being manifestly to some extent independent of evidence, inasmuch as evidence cannot penetrate to its secret home even when conclusive. And thus I venture humbly to submit that we have all of us reason to bear this truth in mind, if we would prepare to celebrate rightly that advent of Christ into the

world which in order to prove effectual to salvation must also be an advent of Christ to our individual hearts.

3. But before closing it will be needful briefly to touch upon the statement of Philip, that Moses in the Law and the Prophets did write of Christ. It may possibly be open to question what amount of stress we are to lay upon the words '*Moses* in the Law,' or how far they bind us to one opinion about the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Thus much, however, we may confess by the way, that the difficulties involved in maintaining the non-Mosaic authorship of it appear to be at the very least as great as any that can be alleged on the other side. But this is manifestly one of those questions which may be safely asserted to be more or less subordinate to and independent of the great central truths and facts of the Gospel. Of this, however, there can be no doubt, that the Pentateuch as a whole is a substantive fact of ancient literature as much as any other composition of past ages; that it existed in its present form at a period long anterior to Christ; that in this Pentateuch, whether we look to its history in Genesis, or elsewhere, or to its ostensible prophecies, or to the complex sacrificial and ceremonial system

embodied in it, does contain a large amount of matter which is possessed of comparatively little interest, and of hardly any meaning, except on the supposition that it refers to a Messiah. With us, moreover, it cannot be a question whether such a Messiah has already come or is yet to come.

It remains therefore either that we accept the manifest illustration and light which the assumed fact of the Messiah's advent throws upon these books, or else that we acquiesce in the unmeaningness and the want of intelligibility which must otherwise be allowed to characterise them. The position is just this. On the supposition of reference to Christ the books of Moses—for I do not scruple to call them so—become far more full of meaning and far more replete with interest than they are on the supposition that such reference is imaginary. For if the assumed Messianic allusions are disallowed to what else can the passages containing them refer? Certainly to nothing which does not rob them of half their point and render them infinitely tamer and more insipid. If they do refer to Christ we find in them an exquisite beauty, a most marvellous and perfect harmony, a most pregnant meaning and a most accurate correspondence. Is it reasonable to reject such

reference, not in order that we may make these writings more intelligible, but may involve ourselves in hopeless perplexities as to what they do mean if they do not mean this? It is evident that a marvellous correspondence with subsequent events does exist. Are we to assert that the one has nothing whatever to do with the other because they so marvellously correspond?

The case, for example, resembles the discovery of the key to a cypher; it is found to fit precisely, it makes it intelligible, it enables us to read it satisfactorily, and it is the only thing which does. Are we justified in rejecting it because it gives the writing a significance which we are unwilling to acknowledge? Nay, my brethren, is it at all likely that any man would reject it if the interest involved were one of such trivial importance as the reading of a cypher? I trow not. But forsooth, because the interest is one which affects the destinies of the human race, and the interpretation of the ways of providence, and the responsibilities of mankind, therefore it is convenient to reject it, and to reduce the writing to comparative obscurity and nonsense, rather than be confronted by such tremendously solemn and startling sense.

And so likewise with the writings of the prophets: if they do refer to Christ we can but be astonished at the marvellous completeness and accuracy of the portrait, at the exact fitness of the words to the events; for of the possibility of the correspondence being drawn, whether rightly or wrongly, there can be no doubt; it is a matter of fact that it does exist. Are we then to shut our eyes to this correspondence, or to deny it altogether, because to admit it would involve us in conclusions which are undesirable? Is this fairness, or love of truth, or common honesty, such as would not only be required but readily granted in a matter of merely secular or mundane interest? No, my brethren, we may be quite sure that in all these questions the real difficulty arises from personal ignorance of the living Christ and from personal repugnance to His yoke. Did we know Him as our own blest Saviour and Redeemer, we should gratefully recognise the indications and discern the traces of Him which are scattered up and down like jewels in a mine, or as particles of gold-dust in the bed of a river, through the Psalms, and the Prophets, and the Law. Had we found Him to be, as indeed He is, our only refuge, our sure abiding confidence and unfailing hope, we should have

no difficulty in allowing, but much rather should most thankfully confess, that Moses in the Law, and the Prophets, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, did write of Him.

SERMON II.

THE BIRTHDAY OF CHRIST—ITS MESSAGE.

ISAIAH VII. 14.

*Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son,
and shall call his name Immanuel.*

It was my object yesterday to try to show that unless we are prepared to accept the light which the Gospel has thrown upon the Old Testament we shall weary ourselves in vain to understand it. We can arrive at no consistent sense, and shall lose much which on the other supposition would be intelligible. But then the difficulty which confronts us here is just this, that we must *accept* the Gospel. We must take it as it is whether or not it can be shewn to demonstration to be true, and even though in the process of our inquiry we discover more and more plainly that the truth of it is not a matter for demonstration. And that this is neither more nor less than the Gospel itself assumes and implies; for whatever else is un-

certain, so much at least is sure, that the Gospel appeals to our faith, and disclaims to satisfy the reason. The compensation however consists in this, that if we once accept the Evangelical message of God, and acknowledge the light which it reflects backwards on the elder volume of Revelation, we shall be most amply rewarded by the additional glory which is given to both. The Old Testament and the New will then form a consistent whole for which no corresponding equivalent can be found, if we deny the one to be the fulfilment of the other.

In fact, it would seem that the familiar argument from design is capable of being appropriately applied to this subject. We find dispersed here and there throughout the Old and New Testaments various traces and indications of fitness and adaptation of parts. One thing seems to be done with reference to something else which was said; and that which was said does not appear to receive the fulness of its possible meaning till the accomplishment of something else which was afterwards done. Of the reality of this possible correspondence there can be no doubt. That it is not impossible to trace it is simply a matter of fact. Now, on the supposition for a moment that a correspondence was designed, would not phenomena such as



these which must be admitted to exist give evidence of it? They would undoubtedly furnish examples of design, if any such design there were. In other words, the correspondence is as complete as if it had been intended. May it therefore not have been intended because it is so complete? In nature it is certain there are traces of possible design. You may deny them to be sufficient indications of it, but once admit the fact of design, and the existence of a Designer inevitably follows. And so here we can discern traces of what looks like design. If they are accepted for such then it inevitably follows that the New Testament answers to the Old, that the Old was the anticipation of the New, and the New the fulfilment of the Old. The design was the work of a Designer. It was not casual, but intended. The frequency and completeness with which it seems to occur shew it to have been more than casual, therefore it was intended.

Now these observations, whatever they may be worth, receive special and abundant illustration in the text which I have chosen for the subject of our thoughts to-day. Here, if any where, I apprehend we shall find a fitting in of one part of the puzzle to the other. If they do fit was it the result of accident or design?

Was the coincidence fortuitous or intended? If it is found to be a very complete correspondence, does not that fact alone furnish strong presumptive evidence that we have here the design of a great Designer, and not merely the blind caprice of a fortuitous chance?

Again, in the case before us, there can be no question as to what the Church desires to teach us through this passage. Its appointment for the first evening lesson to-day clearly indicates its supposed reference to Christ. But how to make out this reference satisfactorily or to demonstration is altogether a different matter. The text has ever been found to be one of the most difficult in Scripture. It has been the battle-field of Jew and Christian from the first; latterly it has furnished matter for dispute to the more insidious enemy of Christ, the rationalist interpreter of prophecy. It would be foreign to my purpose, and manifestly out of place in a Sermon of this nature on a day like this, to enumerate or review the various interpretations of it that have been advanced. To do so would be to trifle and dally with the intellect instead of seeking to instruct the heart, and impart to it lessons of wisdom which may one day be rewarded, or may bring with them their own reward. We will rather, as

far as we may, endeavour to approach this passage as if for the first time. Let us try to understand what it must mean, and to determine what it cannot. Let us with full faith in Christ seek to ascertain how it supports and strengthens that faith, and to that end strive to lay aside prejudice, and to come to it with a single eye.

1. And first, it seems to me that much as we may insist upon the Messianic reference of prophetic Scriptures, and eagerly watch as those who wait for the dawn, for faint glimmerings of Christ in them, it nevertheless is as unwise as it is impossible to maintain that such is their exclusive reference. The Bible is not a crystallised, organic miracle, distinct in all its parts and accidents from every human composition, but much rather a work resembling other human works in the process of its growth and developement, only marked out from them by the special care and superintending providence of God operating upon it. Thus, for example, the prophecies it contains were uttered in the ordinary course of the chosen people's history, as occasion and circumstances called them forth, but the Spirit of God which controlled and directed them, ordained that over and beyond the first and primary meaning of

many of them there should be a further, fuller, and deeper significance, which was afterwards to be manifested and fulfilled in the person of His Son. They were not accepted by the people of their own time as anything else than the ordinary and natural exhibition of that prophetic energy and life which was the recognised possession and the special glory of the chosen race. The gift was an uncommon and a supernatural gift, but the mode in which it was exhibited was regular, orderly, and so to say natural. The prophets when they delivered their burdens were not speaking in a startling and unexpected manner, but in the common discharge of their acknowledged vocation. And so their prophecies in many instances had exclusive reference to the events which gave rise to them. And in none can we conceive that the primary sense was so far subordinated as to be altogether merged in the secondary meaning, at least not in any prophecies which had apparent reference to the events of the day. Had it been otherwise the men who spake them would have been out of place as personal agents in the history of their time; they could not possibly have been understood by their contemporaries, and could only have been regarded, which they do not seem to have been,



as the mere puppets of supernatural intervention and a miraculous machinery.

And so with this great Messianic prophecy. Significant and glorious as it is in its reference to Christ, we cannot suppose, on any right principles of interpretation, but that it had a primary and direct reference to the occasion which evoked it. Ahaz, the faithless and idolatrous king of Judah, was distressed at the formidable confederation of Israel and Syria. He seems to have gone out to the conduit of the upper pool, in the highway of the fuller's field, probably to inspect the fortifications, and to examine the water-supply, when Isaiah was bidden to take with him his son Shear-jashub, and to go to meet him. He told him distinctly that the confederation should not stand, and that within a specified period of sixty-five years Israel should be no more a people. Ahaz, it appears, laughed his assertion to scorn; for the prophet adds, 'If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established;' and thereupon he challenges the king to ask for a sign, and to ask it either in the depth or in the height above. But Ahaz, with the kind of pride which likes to believe itself humble, said, I will not ask, neither will I tempt the Lord. Thereupon said the Prophet, 'The Lord Himself shall give

you a sign ; Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel.'

It is hard indeed to see how an event which was to happen seven hundred years after this time should furnish any intelligible sign to Ahaz. If there was nothing in the present to which the words could or did refer, how was it possible that Ahaz should understand or learn from them? *We* may indeed perceive how that the promise of the Incarnation was a virtual pledge that the chosen nation should last till it had taken place, and therefore a pledge that it should be delivered from the present distress, just as in fact the gift of divine Salvation in Christ Jesus brings with it an implied promise of deliverance from all lesser evils ; for 'how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?' But was it likely, or even possible, that Ahaz should see all this? Would not the ability to do so have implied a miraculous intuition that could have dispensed with prophecy altogether? Besides, a far distant event like the Incarnation could hardly in any sense be a sign, because it could not be apprehended till it had taken place, whereas a sign is a visible token of an invisible reality. I infer therefore that Isaiah's words must have found their first and apparent fulfilment in the immediate present.

What however this fulfilment was it may be hard to say; but let us bear this in mind, that even on the supposition that the prophet alluded to the birth of a son about to be born to himself, who should be called Immanuel, and nothing more, we do not escape from the difficulty that this passage contains a genuine prediction; for how was it that the seer could so confidently foretell the deliverance of the nation within a limited time, the passing of the child, viz. out of infancy, when it is obvious from the context that the king himself was slow to expect and unwilling to believe it? If therefore, under any interpretation, it is impossible to deny the supernatural here, we do not after all so vastly increase the difficulty of the text, by giving it a Messianic reference, as to make the supposition that it contains one altogether incredible. It is clearly not so difficult to believe that there should be a prophecy of the Messiah, as that there should be a prophecy at all. It is impossible to shew that there is no prophecy here; why then may we not have that which is the less marvel of the two, a prophetic reference to the Messiah?

It is as impossible to declare beforehand the events of to-morrow or of next year as it is to predict those of seven hundred or a thousand

years to come. The one demands the exercise of a faculty not given to man, no less than the other; it is only the vulgar and wondering mind which would acknowledge a Divine agency in the one case and not in the other. Any honest treatment of the text of this passage cannot but admit that there is an exercise of this faculty here: devout criticism of it will acknowledge the highest.

Again, it is most remarkable and significant that the literal form and precise language of this verse is of a character which does not readily lend itself to any merely natural and commonplace interpretation. So strange, to say the least of it, is the choice of the word 'Virgin' in connection with conceiving and bringing forth, that all are at a loss to determine its exact force. Whether the prophet alludes to one (1) who was then a virgin, and who was present on this occasion; or (2) to his own wife, already the mother of his eldest son; or (3) to another wife of his own, or (4) to a second whom he was about to marry, his first being dead (of all which supposed facts we know absolutely nothing and have no ground for supposing them); or (5) again, to the future wife of Ahaz whom he was about shortly to espouse; or (6) lastly, to any imaginary virgin who might be married and bear a son within the

given time, are all questions which it is utterly hopeless to determine, and which only shew the stubbornness of this text to yield a merely natural sense, or bear one single commonplace interpretation.

Again, the distinct and definite manner in which this word is used: '*The Virgin*,' the particular virgin, the virgin *κατ' ἐξοχήν*, or again as an apostrophe, '*Thou, O Virgin*,' together with the perhaps preferable rendering of the verb '*thou shalt call*' in the 2nd and not the 3rd person, all point us to some possible ulterior meaning which may underlie the apparent sense, and are certainly remarkable peculiarities which seem inappropriate and out of place if intended to suggest no more than the obvious and ephemeral meaning of the prophecy. The words and idiom are strange if selected to express so commonplace a fact, as the one assumed, and nothing more.

But on the other hand, what a fulness and resource of meaning is discovered if for a moment we consent to bring them into connection with the Gospel. Under the power of that lens they are kindled to a glowing heat. Indeed it is certain that no interpretation short of *this* can be found adequate to their emphasis and weight. Every reference which is merely

temporary fails to justify the energetic force of such expressions. They become too mighty for the moment. The occasion breaks down under them. They are hyperbolical and exaggerated, if not altogether metaphorical, or even wanting in reference. In their meaning is limited to the passing occurrence which called them forth: they are simply insisted to that occurrence: it is only by reflecting them to the far future, and to one solitary event in the world's history, that we find an object worthy of their strength and truthness. That event is the introduction of Christ.

Let us then proceed to throw the pure and glowing light of Christianity on these sacred words and try to reach what they have to teach us. And first there is the introduction of a new element into our so-called humanity.

A virgin shall conceive. This is the very first beginning of the Gospel, and does it not ask for more, in explanation? Must there not be a beginning of the question here? Is it possible to have anything but the mere word of Scripture to rest on here, and is it possible to show a demonstration that that word is true? I answer, with the most unhesitating assurance, that it is not: and, further, I maintain that among those who were the very first to believe this fact, there never was any one who could

have had such demonstration. They must have taken it upon trust; not upon evidence, but upon faith. So far was their probation not different from our own. The mysterious secret of the divine Visitation was necessarily entrusted to one breast only, and that the pure and holy breast of the blessed Virgin. We must look this matter, brethren, boldly in the face, and not shrink from it through false delicacy, or the fear of irreverence, or any thing else. The times demand it of us. Either our holy religion had a supernatural foundation and commencement, or it had not. Either Christ our Lord was the Son of God, and born of a virgin, or He was not. There is no middle position, there is no other alternative. We must adopt the one or the other of these, and abide by it. And, I repeat, it is simply a matter of faith; you cannot prove it, if you try to do so for a thousand years. It is now as it was at the first, you must either believe it or reject it. But bear this in mind: if you reject it, you must reject it also upon faith, for you cannot disprove it. You may say that the evidence fails, but you can establish no counter evidence; and therefore the question is just this, whether you will accept what is, in the fullest sense of the word, a miracle, upon evidence collateral, circumstan-

tial, and abundant, which would assuredly be accepted as satisfactory if it were adduced in proof of any thing less than miraculous, involving only temporal interests, or be prepared to maintain, with the prince of sceptics, that no amount of evidence can make the miraculous credible.

Again, we must not shrink from this question; because there is a way in which, without positively denying this and other like facts of Christianity, the mind unconsciously mythicises or idealises them, and does not hold them as bare and simple facts; they are consigned to the sphere of the imagination, and there left. They are not concrete, substantive realities, but shadows and ideas. This is not faith. We must decide whether or not we believe, as a bare³ historical fact, that the circumstances of our Lord's birth fulfilled the conditions of this prophecy, even if we refuse to admit that it referred to Him. But in point of truth the two admissions will probably go together. If we believe the Incarnation as a simple *fact* we shall not be staggered at believing that Isaiah prophesied of it. If we believe it only as the mythical expression of an idea, we may well question if he did, and shall insist on referring his words to something else. If, on the other



hand, we believe he did we shall not be staggered at the *fact*, but shall adore the wisdom and the power and the love which it revealed.

And in seeking to estimate it as a fact we must not lose sight of the design which it fulfilled and the end which it accomplished. For without the Incarnation it is clear that our humanity is unredeemed. The stream is corrupt from first to last; it has no means of purifying itself, and no element of purity has been introduced into it. If Christ was only in *kind* a Plato or a Socrates, then it is hard to see how the world should be more benefited by Him than it was by them. But if He brought with Him an infusion of life and was Himself the centre and source of life, then it is plain that He did that for our humanity which they neither did nor ever professed to do. And this is what I say, and what the Gospel says He did, but I cannot prove it, nor does the Gospel attempt to prove it, except upon one condition, which is that of Faith. 'These things are written that ye might believe, and that believing ye might have life.' Ye shall not have life in order that ye may believe what the Gospel says, but believing ye shall have life.

Christ however did not come to infuse mechanically a principle of life which could not

but take effect whether the world would or no, but He came to introduce an element which if apprehended by faith would inevitably purify, spiritualise, immortalise mankind. He came to give men *power* to become the sons of God, even to as many, but only to as many, as received Him and believed on His name. And herein is evidenced the shallowness and futility of those systems which attribute to sacramental virtue what is as a matter of fact the special and exclusive prerogative of faith. Baptism does not, cannot unite, in any saving way, the unbeliever or the half believer unto Christ. The Supper of the Lord does not, cannot replenish with life, one who has no share in the believer's life. Christ Himself could do no mighty work where there was inveterate unbelief, how much less His sacraments? And do not suppose, my younger brethren, that this is merely the unbelief of scepticism. The like baneful effects accompany in their degree every manifestation of that secondary kind of unbelief which mistakes anything for Christ, and rests on anything short of the Person of Christ the Virgin-Born. It is easy to confound the grace of Christ with the means of grace which Christ ordained, but bear in mind that the means of grace themselves assume a prerequi-

site condition, which is that of Faith. Faith will not indeed dispense with the Sacraments, but the Sacraments are an absolute nonentity, they become a delusion and a mockery without Faith. If you desire a larger share of the Christian's life, which is the life of Christ, you will seek it indeed, you must seek it indeed, through and by the Sacraments, but you can *receive* it only upon *Faith*.

And on the other hand, we see of how superficial a character is that system, if it can be called a system, which professes to accept the coming of Christ as an event of so magical a nature as that by its mere occurrence the condition of mankind, as far as regards salvation, is sufficiently and adequately changed, without reference to personal faith. Thus it is supposed to have influenced the human race objectively and in the mass. It has changed the fortunes of the world much in the same way as decisive battles fix and change the destinies of nations. There is a sense in which this is obviously true. The position of mankind since the birth of Christ is different from what it was before it. We cannot conceive of the human family *with* the Incarnation as we should have conceived of our race if that event had never occurred. But this difference is not the mea-

sure of Christ's Salvation. It falls infinitely short of it. The birth of Jesus Christ was potentially the salvation of the world, but virtually it was the salvation of His elect—of those only who receive Him as a Saviour. We are indeed told that He 'is the Saviour of all men,' but 'specially,' in the special Gospel sense, 'of them' and of them only, 'that believe.' We are therefore driven back to our former position, that as without faith it is impossible to please God, so without personal belief in Christ it is not possible to receive, or derive advantage from, His salvation. If we may venture to adopt the figure of the eastern poet, The Person of Christ in His life and death is a remedy of sovereign power, not however to those who think of but to those who take it.*

Again, another blessed truth which this verse, interpreted by the Incarnation, teaches us is the *nearness* of our God; 'And shall call His name Immanuel,' God with us. And it is this truth, we may say with confidence, which is the distinctive glory of Revelation. The old mythologies could not guess at it; they had hazy dreams and faint recollections of a present God in the past, but in the present they could not discern Him. Philosophy could do little more:

* Cf. *Hitopadesa*, 36. 2. Edit. Schlegel and Lassen.

it could only feel after Him, grope in the thick darkness, if so be it might find Him. And, brethren, we may boldly say, that the philosophy of these latter days can hardly do so much; it seems to grope in the thick darkness if so be it may not find Him. The God of the Deist, yea, the God of the Socinian, we may say it on their own confession, is a God afar off. Vastly different is the God whom the Prophet here proclaims, whom the glorious Festival of to-day reveals—the Babe lying in the manger, the Creator one with his lowliest creatures, God with us. And that familiar spectacle is what the prediction of the prophet was to Ahaz, what the vision itself was to the shepherds, ‘a sign’ for all time, a pledge of the presence of God, a token of His union with us. He has not been content with a sublime existence under unknown conditions and in distant worlds, which our imagination and our intellect struggles in vain to define, discover, or comprehend—which mocks us with fallacious hopes, while it ever allures our fancy to make the attempt, and as constantly baffles our endeavours to understand it; but He has made Himself one with our family, he has allied Himself with our house by taking of our flesh and blood and assuming our manhood to Himself: henceforth

we are no more twain but one flesh. Christ is at once the natural and the supernatural head of our race ; in Him God comes down and communes with man, with believing man, upon the earth, and in Him man, the lowliest of the sons of men, if believing, meets his God, and ascends with the Son of God to sit down with Him on the right hand of the Father in the highest heaven. To the Christian, God is no longer a God afar off, He is a very present God, for every child reminds him of the childhood which Christ assumed, of the weak and lowly infancy under which the highest God as at this time revealed and veiled Himself, and every man, without respect of persons, rank or intellect, is a sign to him of that common humanity, that essential manhood which Christ our Lord, irrespective of accident or station, yea, under accidents the most unfavourable and in the humblest station, condescended to assume, and by assuming, once for all glorified, ennobled, deified.

Now it is just this which those who reject the Incarnation as a fact, cut themselves off from and refuse. They have no assured guarantee of the nearness of God. It is not a personal nearness ; they have no *knowledge*, they can only *guess*, they emerge from the sphere of certainty to enter that of conjec-

ture. The gulf between the manhood and the godhead is still unbridged; there is a chasm which defies them to pass over it. They are not personally united to God; in the language of St Paul, they are not 'in God the Father, and in His Son Jesus Christ.' This they would themselves acknowledge, for it would be impossible to deny it. We can *know* nothing of God if we reject His revelation in Christ. Instead of the solid foundation of the Divine Humanity to rest on, we have nothing but the shifting sands and insecure foothold of individual speculation. We may persuade ourselves that this is sufficient, but the enlightened conscience will not be satisfied with it. Least of all will a conscience which has known the truth as it is in Jesus, and tasted the sweetness of repose in Him, be persuaded lightly to forsake those waters of Shiloah which flow softly, and to choose instead the turbid and impetuous streams of human speculation and human doubt, which are too muddy to satisfy the thirsty soul, and not deep enough nor calm enough to float her fragile bark securely.

For, lastly, this nearness of our God is not only pledged but *limited* to Jesus. It is the exclusive privilege of the child Immanuel. In Him 'God' is not only 'with us,' but He Him-

self is 'God with us.' He is not the incarnation of God in any such sense as that in which, by a figure, Bacon might be called the incarnation of inductive philosophy, or Newton of mathematical science, that is, He is not a *partial* incarnation of God, the complement of which is to be found in other men, as the deficiencies of one philosopher are supplied by the genius of another; but in Him dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. He is very God of very God as well as very Man of the substance of the Virgin Mary His mother. The temple of His human body is the chosen dwelling-place of Deity, for He is the only-begotten Son of God.

It is in this capacity that we as Christians are invited to adore Him to-day. Let us therefore join the company of the faithful, and repair in spirit to the manger at Bethlehem, bearing with us the child-like heart, that we may find in that blessed and lowly Child a sufficient pledge, a sure token, an abiding 'sign' that God in very deed is still with us.

SERMON III.

THE BIRTHDAY OF CHRIST—ITS WITNESS.

2 Cor. v. 17.

*If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature :
old things are passed away ; behold, all
things are become new.*

IN my sermon on Monday last I endeavoured to point out some of the harmonies which Faith may discover between the prophetic promise of Christ and the apparent fulfilment of that promise as we find it in the Gospel History. I purpose now at the close of our Christmas Festival, on the last day of the old year, on the eve and threshold of the new, to dwell upon some of the results and consequences of Christ's coming, as they shew themselves in the case of the Christian, and, we may say, to the world at large.

It would of course be open to any unfavourable and prejudiced outsider, in the face of correspondences which might be produced between history and prophecy, to say 'This may

be all very well; such correspondences it may be possible to trace; to a certain extent it is no doubt true that they exist; they may be discovered elsewhere, out of the sphere which you represent as their exclusive and peculiar home; an ingenious and competent advocate might probably produce many things very similar and hardly less striking in favour of any religion which it was his interest to defend; but what does it all go for in the mind of an enlightened and impartial enquirer? It may be very pretty, but what is its use? What is its result? You may find the same kind of pleasure in tracing the analogy between type and antitype, oracular utterances and historic events, which a child finds in putting together his dissected map, but what of that? Would you call it fit pastime for a man? Would you have us, as intellectual and thoughtful reasoners, give in our adherence to such dreams as these? Would you have us profess our belief in a religion which is content to rest on such a basis as this? You must shew us rather what it has done, or still more, (for it is now on its trial, we reject the testimony of the past, and believe only in the absolute religion, the religion of the future, and) you must shew us first what it can now do, and how it may still hope to stand.'

And it is here, brethren, that the true and earnest Christian, so far from feeling the ground shaken beneath him, is constrained to confess that he finds his position impregnable, and not only so, but that from being able to take it up he is enabled also to act, if need be, on the offensive against all adversaries in such a way as sooner or later cannot but discover their inherent weakness, and turn the tide of advantage confessedly on his own side. It is here, if anywhere, that he finds himself the inheritor of the ancient promise, 'No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper. I will make thee a new sharp threshing instrument, having teeth; thou shalt thresh the mountains and beat them small, and shalt make the hills as chaff.' 'I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist.' And that which makes him feel this is the personal knowledge of the inexhaustible power which there is in Christ to *regenerate the heart*. He knows that it is true, and knowing it to be true of himself, he knows that it is true likewise for the world; that if any man be in Christ he is a new creature. And thus the consciousness of what the Gospel is in itself is to him sufficient and ample proof of its Divine origin, while it

furnishes him with a weapon, should he have occasion to use it, which must eventually sooner or later pierce the conscience and detect the sin of those who, rejecting the authority of the Gospel, manifest thereby their ignorance of its power. Of course I am far from asserting that the ultimate conviction and conversion of every unbeliever and sceptic is thus rendered a matter of inevitable certainty. By no means; all that the Church has guaranteed to her is that she shall always be able to maintain her ground against all assailants, and that she shall finally triumph, and therefore that there will always be, some here and there, though they may be few, who from having been her adversaries will become her repentant and submissive children, and each individual who is so converted (I use this word in no partial or sectarian sense, but as the only one which will adequately express my meaning) will furnish clear and unmistakeable evidence of the reality of her mission, and of the authority which she derives from God.

1. Now, we may observe here, that St Paul makes the assertion of the text as if it were a universal law. 'If any man be in Christ it is a new creation.' He speaks out of the resources of his own experience, and appeals with unquestioning confidence to the experi-

ence of those to whom he writes. He is not speaking to them in an unknown language of things unknown, but is holding up before the conscience of his Corinthians, and through them of Christendom at large, a mirror in which an image of spiritual life is reflected, that they can only recognise as the likeness of their own. For the fact therefore of the truth here expressed we have this double assurance: (1) The confessed experience of the writer, and (2) a similar implied confession on the part of those to whom he is writing. The one confirms the other; the one is corroborated and established by the other; and both together constitute a twofold testimony which is not lightly to be set aside.

And thus I should say, that supposing it could be shewn, from criticism or anything else, that the meaning of these words which I am preparing to unfold is possibly or even probably not their meaning, yet forasmuch as it has often and does continually thus come home to the conscience, and verify itself in the experience of one Christian after another in all ages of the Church, it is entitled to the most deliberate consideration, and does derive from this very fact an overwhelming amount of authority.

For example, if a man were to say of this

and similar statements in Scripture, It is more than probable that the writer did not mean by them what it is alleged they do mean, would this really be of sufficient importance to outweigh the positive testimony of many others who declare that they find his language so understood exactly answering to and interpreting the facts of their own experience? The language of one who can say, I have myself felt this and know that it is true, is entitled to more consideration than the merely speculative questionings of one who professes no experience at all in the matter. This is but common sense, and would at once be recognised as such in any matters of merely ordinary interest.

What then is it which the Apostle declares? He says, that to be in Christ is to be a new creature, that no man can be in Christ without being so. And I prefer taking His words exactly as they stand, uninfluenced by any desire to make them harmonise with a theory or to colour them by prejudice. I assume that when He says 'a new creature' He means not formally or potentially or professedly, but positively and actually a 'new creature.' And then it will follow that we must interpret the phrase 'being in Christ' by the standard of its declared result, and refuse to admit that that can be a

state in Christ which is attended by no consciousness of the new creation. To be in Christ, therefore, can hardly be a periphrase for being baptised, because it is evident that not every one who has been baptised is a new creature, or has any consciousness of the new creation.

It is not the mere outward profession of Christ which is sufficient in any sense except an outward one to make a man a new creature. Not even a conscious and deliberate participation in the habits and the moral life of Christians, accompanied, as it necessarily would be, by a renunciation of past ungodliness, is enough to satisfy the requirements of these vivid and vital words. In that case, if nothing more were meant, it would not be possible to acquit the writer of a certain amount of exaggeration. Whereas we believe that so far from his words being in any degree metaphorical or exaggerated, they almost fail to express the fulness of his meaning. If therefore to be in Christ is to be recreated, to be made anew, that only can be a state in Christ which recreates us and makes us new.

And it must be observed also, that any such new creation cannot be regarded as a condition of unconscious life, both (1) from the nature of the case, because it is only the lowest

forms of life which approach to or realise a condition of unconsciousness, and (2) also on account of what follows, which, as we may observe hereafter, seems to express a condition directly affecting the consciousness, 'Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.' If therefore we are new made in Christ, we must assuredly *know* that we are made anew. We must be conscious of the change. There must be that in us which leaves no room for doubt, but shews plainly that the change is a reality. St Paul cannot mean, that by being in Christ we are to be new creatures in such a way as not to know it. As well might we suppose that Adam in the first creation, when he rose fresh from the hands of his Maker, had no knowledge of his own existence and experienced no sensations from contact with the outer world.

What then is the condition which produces these marvellous results? In other words, what is it to be in Christ? It would seem that St Paul, to whom the use of this phrase appears to be almost peculiar, must mean by it what our Lord means when, after exhorting His disciples to believe in Him and to shew their love for Him by keeping His commandments, as He does in the 14th chapter of St John, He goes on in the 15th to exhort them to 'abide in Him.'

This 'abiding in Christ' must obviously be very nearly what St Paul means by 'being in Christ,' and what our Lord means is clear from His reply to Judas, not Iscariot, 'If a man love me he will keep my words, and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.' In other words, to be in Christ is to abide, continue, and dwell in Christ, and to have him dwelling in the heart by faith. It expresses that close and intimate union between the soul and Christ which is the result in the first instance simply of faith, and which is maintained afterwards through the same faith working by love: it expresses that relation of the Christian to his Lord, that condition of reciprocity between them both, which he only who believes can understand, and which he only who knows it by personal experience can appreciate.

And thus it must be borne in mind, that in order to derive any intelligent meaning from our Lord's words or from those of His Apostle, there is assumed a condition of heart in harmony with them. Where that is lacking it is not possible to convey their meaning. We shall labour in vain to discover it if we ourselves are not in Christ by conscious union of heart and will with Him. But of this we may be sure, that these expressions in their fulness

cannot refer merely to any formal position of external membership producing no effect upon the heart and manifesting itself in no definite manner in the life. To suppose that would at once be to deprive them of all their significance and vitality, besides bringing them into contradiction with the statement of the text. But to be in Christ is much more than this; it is to be joined to Him as one spirit by the power of faith, to be able to find, so to say, a second and redeemed personality in Him, and with it a sense of deliverance from the burden of sin as a present and condemning power, as well as participation in His perfect righteousness. It is therefore a condition which can only be regarded as fully realised when it is witnessed to and reflected by the conscience. If the conscience is not purged from the defilement of sin, and does not, so to say, attest the fact of Christ's redemption, it is idle to suppose that we can be in any just or appropriate sense in Him. We may indeed have a formal right so to regard ourselves, as our baptism declares to us, but nothing can be more certain than that we have not yet risen to a personal knowledge of the height and standard of our privileges. We may have kept our Christmas Festival with the semblance of outward joy, but we have not

rejoiced inwardly because Christ has been born in our hearts. If we are still compassed about with the cloud and darkness of self, it is because the Sun of Righteousness has not yet risen upon us with healing in His wings.

2. But we pass on now to investigate the character of the new creation, which is the declared result of being in Christ. What are some of its more essential features? It may be truly said, that to be in Christ makes the whole man new.

In the first place, his spiritual nature is so renovated that it may almost be described as a bestowal of entirely new and unknown gifts, and is most fitly called a new creation. Indeed, St Paul speaks of it elsewhere as a change from death to life; and St John virtually says the same when he tells us that he wrote his Gospel 'that we might believe, and that believing we might have life through the name of Christ.' Or again, in his first Epistle, 'He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life;' and our Lord also implies the like truth, however we may interpret his words, by saying, 'Ye must be *born* again,' ye must have the principle of a new life communicated to you; ye must rise from the dead. And the fact corresponds with

this, for it is something totally new for a man who has, it may be, lived in forgetfulness of God to begin to be actuated by principles of love for Him, to take delight in prayer, and to live by faith in Christ. This is all so thoroughly opposed to the merely natural conditions of existence, that it may justly be called a resurrection, a new creation, or a new life.

The greatness of the spiritual change is also shewn us in its being spoken of as a transition from darkness to light. Nothing can be more forcible than that, nor more appropriately illustrative of the effect upon the consciousness. As one who emerges from a dark cavern to the broad light of day, so is a man who, from being dead without Christ, is made alive in Him; he passes out of darkness into light, and is conscious that he does.

But the change is felt also in man's intellectual nature. To see that this is true, we need only compare the literature of the Christian world with that of the world before it became Christian—the *Iliad* and *Æneid* with the *Divina Commedia* or with *Paradise Lost*. It is impossible not to recognise in these last the existence of a new principle working like leaven, the mighty throbbings of a regenerate life. It is not that these poems are religious, or their

theme a Christian one ; but they are the effort and expression of a changed intellectual nature, upon which has passed the influence of infinite aspirations and regenerated hopes. They are, if we may so say, redolent of eternal life ; and belief in the reality of that life constitutes in them a pervading and essential element, which it is not possible to eliminate. It must be obvious to every one that the case is quite otherwise with the masterpieces of ancient poesy, and it must be equally plain that the introduction of this element could not but exercise, as it has exercised, a great, albeit in many cases an unconscious, influence on the intellectual life of man.

And what is seen generally in these great and notorious instances is to be observed also in the case of individuals. He who is in Christ Jesus is a new creature, and he feels it even intellectually. It is not that his mental powers are thereby developed or rendered stronger or more acute, but a new pleasure is added to the exercise of all the energies of that mind which has learnt to adore the profound wisdom of the mind of Christ. To him who can look out upon the world of science, art, or literature with the eye of a regenerate mind, the whole vision is transformed, and becomes transformed from glory to glory. The touch of the ma-

gician's wand has wrought a marvellous change; and fair as these things were before, they are fairer now; the landscape is brighter and more sunny, and the gales of Paradise are wafted over it, scattering the soft odours of the garden of the Lord, and whispers of the blessed presence of Him who hath made an end to sin, and hath triumphed over death. Brethren, these things are not a dream, they are a beautiful reality—the more beautiful because so real; for 'we speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen;' they are not the vain illusions of a fantastic mind, but the sober verities of fact. We could bring you thousands to acknowledge their truth, and confess that it is thus that St Paul's words verify themselves in those who, rising to the fulness of the stature of life in Christ, find that they are indeed new creatures.

Nor let it seem incredible that, if this change is a reality, it should make its influence felt also even on the physical life. Physicians will tell you that there is much more hope of their skill succeeding when they have to work on the system of a patient who is placid and resigned, than on that of one who is in all the terrors of the shadow of death, and the fearful looking-for of judgment. And it is a fact that the body



does sympathise with the spirit in its restoration, and bears witness to the truth of it in a sense of increased stability and more perfect soundness. Nor is it wonderful that it should be so, if we indeed believe that we are by faith personally united to the spiritual and never-dying Body of the Lord.

3. Now all that has been said is yet further illustrated and confirmed by the concluding words of this verse, 'Old things are passed away ; behold, all things are become new.' It is impossible that this can refer to any change of which we are consciously ignorant. It would be just as appropriate to say of a man who has been invested with the freedom of a city, that in his case 'old things are passed away, and all things are become new.' In a certain sense there would be of course a truth in it, but in a very feeble one. And to say that St Paul's meaning is analogous to this is simply to eviscerate the Gospel ; it is to make it no longer the power of life unto life. If you can say of professing Christians living in sin that they have been made as much new creatures as the Gospel can make them, and that all that is wanted is that they should walk in newness of life, there is not only an end to the present action of the grace of God, but a contradiction of the known

experience of every true believer in Christ. And I repeat, that it matters not what theories we may adopt, nor to what systems we may adhere, nor by what authorities they can be supported, if there yet remains the simple letter of the Apostle's words, and those words are interpreted and confirmed to us in their more vital sense, by the experience of thousands and of tens of thousands who know that to them personally, upon belief in Christ, 'old things are passed away, and, behold, all things are become new.' For here at least we are confronted by an unexplained fact, which we as honest men are bound not to ignore.

But if, brethren, coming to these words as little children, laying aside all theories, all prejudice, and all anxiety to bring them into harmony with a system, we are content to take them as they are, how glorious do they become, how majestic in their truth, how beautiful and noble in their reality! They reveal to us the special glory of Christ, and the distinctive virtue of His Gospel. He, and He alone, can make all things new, and He proves it to the heart of the believer.

This world is fast passing away; the season reminds us of it; but who among us can endure the memory of the past, its sins, its sorrows, its

misfortunes, its mistakes? By an effort of the will we may manage to elude and forget it, but it remains indelible, and we cannot obliterate it; which among us would consent to live over again the year which we close to-day? There have been in it perchance days and hours of enjoyment, there have been also times of sorrow, anxiety, and pain; to some it may have been a year of sin and of conscious enmity to God, but which of us would care to pass through the like again; and yet do what we will we cannot efface it, it remains an integral portion of our existence. Activity in the pursuit of science or literature may help us to banish the thought of it, but cannot take away its sting. The only antidote for that is participation in the life of Christ; for 'if any man be in Christ he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new;' he can at once look backward on the past with equanimity, and forward to the future with humble confidence and eager hope.

Again, another aspect of the new life which is the special glory of Christ is this, that it continues always new; it knows not the deadening, ageing, influence of time, because it is independent of time and has its well-head in eternity. This is seen in the life of churches, and is expe-

rienced in that of individuals. From age to age, as the Church becomes corrupt or paralysed, there is revealed a new source of energy in the Christian faith which has the power to cleanse, reform, and quicken it. When a spirit of deadly torpor creeps over branches of the Church, not seldom is it the signal for a mighty shaking which revivifies, as in the words of the prophet, the bleached and mouldering bones. This has been repeatedly seen in our own Church, and we devoutly hope may often be seen again.

But it is true likewise of individuals. The life of the Christian never grows old ; it knows no decay ; the aged saint who has served his master for threescore years feels that the stream of his spiritual life is as fresh as it ever was, and he knows that the source of it is inexhaustible because it has continually been proved to be so. He does not move further and further from that source, as his natural life goes on, but nearer and nearer to it. The stream that flows therefrom meets the turbid current of human life in all its windings and at every turn, and it is like that stream which proceedeth ' out of the throne of God and of the Lamb,' ' a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal.' One might think that the grace of Christ coming in contact with the evil of the world would be lost in it, or be

vitiating and neutralised thereby, but it is not so. It has the power to change, but it is itself unchanged; it does not deteriorate, it cannot wax feeble, it will never fail, nor run out. It is not only new once, but is new always. It needs only to be believed in and to be received in order to be found an efficient and effectual agency to make the whole world new, and to regenerate the secret springs of being; for it is dowered with the dowry of immortal youth, and has the virtue of eternal life.

Such then are some of the powers and the present results of that religion the birthday of whose Founder we have lately kept. It will not for a moment be alleged by any that if true they can be matched by the results of any other known religion. The more likely course will be to deny them altogether. But there is a peace in Christ, and in the heart of the Christian who abides in Christ, which the world can neither give nor take away; it may deny, but it cannot extinguish it. And there are moments when the world itself is constrained to acknowledge this, and cannot deny it. And *here* is the stronghold of the Gospel. Here is its abiding witness. There may be difficulties in the history of its rise, in the interpretation of its records, in its relation to an older faith, or to

other faiths, in the continuity of its teaching, and in a hundred other points, but in spite of all there is a marvellous power in it to regenerate the heart, to transform the life, and to transmute, if we may so say, the substance of this earthly world. All things become Divine when joined to Christ, and looked at in the light of His Gospel. The relationships of Father, Brother, Wife, and Child, are made more sacred and more blessed since He was nursed on the knees of an earthly Father, looked up in the face of a human Mother, wept over the grave of a Brother, and was guest at the marriage of a Friend. This however is a matter of sentiment, but the other is a matter of fact. We can fancy these things, but we can feel and know the other, namely that we are indeed new creatures in Christ Jesus.

4. Now we cannot disguise it from ourselves that men are beginning to ask, May we not retain the moral life of Christianity and yet abandon the idea of an historic Christ? that is in fact have a Christianity without a Christmas Day; and the answer is undoubtedly Yes! for this reason, because it is not the moral life which constitutes the distinctive glory of Christianity; you can have a highly developed morality without an historic Christ; but it does

not follow that what you have will be Christianity. The distinctive feature of Christianity lies in the gift of spiritual, that is eternal Life through a Person; and to have this without an historic Christ involves a contradiction in terms and a contradiction in fact. It involves a contradiction in terms, because we cannot have life through a man who it is assumed has no existence. We cannot participate in the life of a person who is a nonentity; it involves a contradiction in fact, because those who disbelieve in an historic Christ do as a matter of fact ignore the truth of any spiritual life in the Gospel sense; they eliminate it from the Christianity which they propose to adopt, and because, as spiritual life is derived from that head, centre, and source of it, who joined Himself to our humanity, and from the fact that He so joined Himself, it follows that if we disbelieve Him to have been so joined, we do necessarily intercept the channel and cut off the supply.

It is of course obvious that the mere *a priori* need of an historic Christ in order that Christianity may stand, does not prove Christ to have been an historic person, nor does it enter into my sphere to prove this. I rather proceed on the assumption, which I am sure is warrant-

able, that it cannot be disproved, and I am anxious to observe that we are not at liberty, after having retained what we are pleased to consider the flower and fruit of Christianity, to cut away the stem and to pluck up the root—to treat the absolute historic character of Christ as a matter of secondary importance, or to resolve it into a nucleus of imaginative myth.

Neither on the other hand can we say that the adaptation of Christianity to the spiritual wants of man may be regarded as the originating cause of it, for many reasons: (1) Because if it were so, how comes it that those who might be disposed to cherish such a theory are most eager to assert that it is *not* adapted to the spiritual wants of man, but that those wants are only to be satisfied by the development of an unknown absolute religion, to be arrived at eventually by an empirical and a tentative process? (2) Or again, because if it were so, it is very strange that these spiritual wants of man which are represented as so true to his nature, should only at one definite epoch of the world's history, and only once in the history of the world, have been able to invent and give birth to a system so peculiarly fitted to supply them, and that so many generations of men in subsequent ages, after long and pain-

ful enquiry, should have been led to acquiesce in and acknowledge, and may we not say adore this fitness, rather than attempt to originate anything more fitted: (3) Or, lastly, because though it is true that the Gospel of Christ meets the spiritual wants of man at every point, and only meets that it may supply them, yet it is also most true, and most carefully to be borne in mind, that so far from that Gospel being by any possibility the spontaneously evolved outgrowth of man's natural heart, it begins by demanding the surrender and the overthrow of all that man holds most dear; it begins by proclaiming the corruption and the alienation and the spiritual death under which man lies, and does not end till it has brought into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. Surely, then, no wise man can consider himself justified in regarding the Gospel of Christ as itself an *effect* of spiritual enlightenment, and not rather as the sole originating and central *cause* of that enlightenment.

Such, then, are some of the thoughts suggested to us by the Christmas festival, and the position in which it finds us. These are days when the faith of man is being tried in every possible way, and the severity of the trial is likely to increase rather than diminish. It

behoves every man to ask himself whether he has any solid foundation on which to rest. That foundation must be one revealed to faith, not one discovered by the reason. We may search from one end of the world to the other, and from one end of time to the other, but we shall find no foundation to compare in stability with that which was laid at Bethlehem in the Person of the Son of God, born as at this time in likeness of our flesh of the substance of the Virgin Mary His mother, and building all our hopes upon that foundation, whether for time or for eternity, we shall be undismayed at the flight of time, because willing and *able* to let the dead past bury its dead; we shall be full of calm resignation in the present and of buoyant and sanguine anticipation for the endless future; we shall be undisturbed by the progress of iniquity, unperplexed at the questionings of doubt, remembering that we were told of days in which iniquity should abound and the love of many should wax cold; but knowing also, as the Apostle knew, and able likewise to confess with him, that 'if any man be in Christ he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.'

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